

REVIEW: *MINDSCAPING THE LANDSCAPE OF TIBET*

Reviewed by Dorje Tashi (Rdo rje bkra shis རོད་རྒྱལ་ཤིས།,
Duojie Zhaxi) University of Colorado-Boulder



Dan Smyer Yü. 2015. *Mindscaping the Landscape of Tibet: Place, Memorability, Ecoaesthetics*. Boston: Walter de Gruyter. 257 pp. ISBN 978-1-61451-553-1 (hardback 140USD), ISBN 978-1-61451-562-3 (paperback 42USD), ISBN 978-1-61451-423-7 (PDF 140USD), ISBN 978-1-61451-980-5 (EPUB 140USD).

Dan Smyer Yü's work (2015) is an important contribution to the field of Tibetan Studies and provides thought-provoking insights on Tibetan landscapes. A professor of anthropology at Yunnan Minzu University, Yü's research interests include trans-regional studies of ethnic relations, religious diversity, and Tibetan Buddhism in the Himalayas. Yü has also been involved in the production of documentary films about Tibet and Tibetan landscape, Buddhism, and culture.

In *Mindscaping the Landscape of Tibet*, Yü explores the potency of Tibetan landscape through the lens of post-Orientalism, with a focus on intimate interactions between place and people, and connections between landscape and mindscape. Containing extensive ethnographic descriptions and theoretical applications, Yü borrows Edward Casey's (b. 1939) concept of "placiality" as a conceptual tool, linking the "materiality and immateriality of place" (23) and exploring their manifestations.

The book features eight chapters, including introduction and conclusion chapters. The remaining six chapters are case studies carried out in Sambha (Sum ba), a Tibetan community in Khri ka (Guide) County, Mtsho lho (Hainan) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Mtsho sngon (Qinghai) Province; Beijing; Shangrila (Xiangelila, Sems kyi nyi zla, Rgyal thang), a Tibetan city in Bde chen (Diqing) Tibetan

Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan Province; and Lha sa. Also included are narratives of the Chinese People's Liberation Army's (PLA) arrival in Tibet in the 1950s, and analysis of the cinematic landscapes of Tibet, Tibetan intellectual critics of traditional Tibet, religious tourism, and public discourse between Tibetans and non-Tibetans.

The introduction (Chapter One) introduces the key concepts of the book, research sites, research methods, and the structure of the book. The final chapter of the book summarizes the main argument of the book, research findings, and revisits his theoretical perspectives. The concept of a mindscape is given as:

a range of reflexes, intellectual reflections, emotional responses, memories, moving images, and mental data storage of scents, colors, sounds, temperatures, and meteorological patterns, all of which originate from human lived experiences enveloped in the physical environment (20).

Drawing on James Gibson's (1904-1979) concept of affordance, Yü explores the relationship between individuals and the environment, examining how the placiality of Tibet speaks to both Tibetans and non-Tibetans when they enter and experience the landscape of cultural Tibet. Similarly, the eco-aesthetic approach is employed to emphasize the Tibetan landscape as "environmental art" (25), and to examine not only a deeper understanding of landscape itself, but also the deities and spirits that are embodied in landscape, as well as how Tibet and Tibetans are perceived, imagined, and represented among Tibetans and non-Tibetans. The remaining chapters aim to answer these issues by engaging in a series of ethnographic narratives.

In Chapter Two (Geopoetics of Place, Gods, and People in Sambha), Yü portrays himself as an outsider, centering his inquiry on an ethnographic case study of Sambha, a Tibetan village in Mtsho sngon, investigating the village's eco-aesthetic landscapes. Yü's detailed narratives of the historical features and cultural identities of sacred landscapes are coherent and informative. His exploration of the stunning landscapes in Sambha reminds him of the memories and reflections other non-Tibetans had of the Tibetan landscape, for instance, Lama Anagarika Govinda's (Ernst Lothar Hoffmann, 1898-1985) memory of the Tibetan landscape in the late 1940s, and

Alexandra David-Neel (1868-1969) and Walter Evans-Wentz's (1878-1965) affection for Tibet. This further emphasizes the impressive nature of the Tibetan landscape.

Through a close relationship with Aku Norbu (A khu nor bu), a local Tibetan tantric practitioner, Yü moves on to examine how Tibetan sacred landscapes (e.g., Sambhadrubgne, Sum ba grub gnas; Ami Megbon, A myes dmag dpon) are associated with deities and spirits, with attention to how local villagers perceive, understand, and interact with sacred landscapes. This results in revealing that landscapes are inhabited by not only people, but also by spiritual entities.

Similarly, Yü's ethnographic narratives of Amne Machen (A myes rma chen) in Chapter Six (Ensouling the Mountain), focuses on Tibetan sacred landscapes, describing the experiences of a pilgrimage to Amne Machen that Yü and his Tibetan and Han Chinese friends undertook. Particularly, Yü explores how Amne Machen, as one of the most prominent holy mountains of Tibet, symbolizes the cultural identity, and belonging to the native Tibetans, and how its harsh environmental conditions bring challenges to Han Chinese crew. For instance, he describes how a few of his Han Chinese crew members in Amne Machen suffered from altitude sickness.

Both chapters Two and Six suggest that the Tibetan sacred landscape is composed not only of physical features and unique eco-aesthetics as reflected by non-Tibetans, but also embraces cultural identity, local history, ancestral memories, religious significance, interrelationships and connections between place and people, and landscape and mindscape. Yü notes that the worship of sacred landscapes is a practiced across Tibetan areas, and Tibetan communities generally have at least one sacred mountain and related embodied deities.

Based on archival research, Chapter Three (Confessions of an Inner Liberation) analyzes journals, diaries, and memoirs written by PLA soldiers and officers in the 1950s. Yü addresses "the legacy of China's Old Tibet/New Tibet as two sides of the same ideological construct created by the Chinese state in the mid-twentieth century" (73). In so doing, he argues that the narratives of PLA propaganda officers and soldiers who participated in the "Second Long March" to Tibet are similar to those of Westerners such as Lama Anagarika

Govinda in that they feature positive eco-aesthetic memories of Tibet and Tibetan landscapes. This narrative challenges the Chinese state's perception of Tibet as *luohou* 'backward', *chuantong* 'traditional', or *mixin* 'superstitious'.

Chapter Four (Memorability of Place Among Anti-traditionalists) focuses on the works of Shogdong (Zhongs dung), a controversial contemporary Tibetan writer and cultural critic. Yü describes the ways in which Shogdong engages in an imagination of modern Tibet and anti-tradition, calling his writing as "a pathology of modernity" concerning "manifested pathos - the emotions, feelings, and pain - that arises as consequences of China's socialist modernity" (98). Yü differentiates Shogdong's imagined modern Tibet from that of Chinese Communist "modernity" by noting that:

Shogdong and like-minded Tibetans appear to be anti-traditionalists when they imagine a modern Tibet, not as a replica of socialist China, but as a new Tibet of their own with a true sense of equality (40).

In contrast, by focusing on the "pro-traditionalist" representation of Tibet, Chapter Five (Touching the Skin of Modern Tibet in the New Tibetan Cinema) explores how the landscape of Tibetan Buddhism in Pema Tsenden's (Pad+ma tshe brtan) films assists in linking the mindscape of spectators with the Tibetan landscape. Tibetan Buddhism in both *The Silent Holy Stones* (2005) and *The Grassland* (2003), directed by Pema Tsenden, plays a major role throughout the films that contain pictorial representations of the Tibetan landscape. Based on his ethnographic narrative, Yü examines how this cinematic Buddhist landscape links the mindscape of spectators with both the physical and cultural landscapes of Tibet. *The Search* (2009) and *Old Dog* (2011), portray the fast emergence of globalization and modernization in the landscape of Tibet, showing how the "spirituality of traditional Tibetan people in their ancestral land are replaced with images and (e)motions of loss, nostalgia, alienation, and desolation" (132). Yü's case study of Tibetan cinema suggests the interconnections between landscape and mindscape, showing that landscape is not only a physical thing seen with the eyes, but is also an ideology that is part of one's mindscape.

Chapter Seven (Drifting in the Mirages of the Tibetan Landscape) explores the ways in which Tibetan landscape in Shangrila constructs the mindscape of non-Tibetans, with a focus on a group of American scholars and students. To Yü, their visit to and interactions with the eco-aesthetics of the local landscape, e.g., spiritual landscapes such as the Drul Yelpa (Brag yer ba) Caves, strongly impact their mindscapes. He notes that visitors often spent "extra time at places where the natural landscape and human cultural elements were entwined" (186). Yü also provides a historical account of how the Chinese name Zhongdian changed into Shangrila in the late 1990s, and explains how the local economy developed due to the new brand name of Shangrila. In so doing, Yü argues that expansion of "tibetanization" in Shangrila was initiated by outsiders for the purpose of their commercial profit, rather than any concern with for the Tibetan language and culture. Yü, however, does not explain who these outsiders are.

Throughout the book, Yü argues for the inseparable interconnections between place and people, and landscape and mindscape. By emphasizing how memories, history, culture, religion, and identity are embodied in landscape, Yü claims that landscape is not only a physical thing, but also an ideological/symbolic process that has the power to (re) produce relationships among and between people.

Overall, the book succeeds in achieving its goal and it is well organized. His ethnographic narratives of Tibetan sacred landscapes in Sambha and Golok (Mgo log) in chapters Two and Six stand out. The exploration of these sacred landscapes further elucidates how memory, myths, and stories of the spirit-world exist in both human mindscapes and natural landscapes.

Yü is uniquely positioned to conduct this research in China. His linguistic competence in both Chinese and Tibetan gives him access to archives, journals, diaries, and memoirs in Chinese and Tibetan languages. His teaching experiences in Beijing, and his work experiences with both Tibetans and Han Chinese, particularly with such key informants as Pema Tseden, a well-known Tibetan filmmaker, allowed him to conduct extensive fieldwork. In addition, although Yü is an outsider/non-Tibetan, given his extensive work experiences in Tibet, his close relationship with his informants, as well as his

linguistic competence, Yü is only a marginal outsider. This critical distance puts him in a unique position to develop a perspective that is critical and theoretically informed.

Yü's ethnographic narrative of Sambha Village and its landscapes brings me to the actual place he describes. I am from Brag dmar nang Village, which is about three kilometers from Sambha. I have personally experienced the specific landscape that Yü describes. For instance, I spent a great deal of time in the vicinity of Ami Megbon herding goats during my early childhood, as well as well Sambhadrubgne, which I see when I go to my home village from Khri ka County Town. Yü's work thus has a strong sense of authenticity for me.

Yü adroitly uses theories as analytical tools. However, at times his employment of theory is dense, interrupting the flow of his narratives. This reader wonders why maps and photographs of the sites he mentions, such as Amne Machen and the Drul Yelpe Caves, are not given. The use of Tibetan terminology throughout the book is problematic. There are no notes on Tibetan transliterations, nor on the names of places and people. It is reasonable to use phonetic transcription for an audience not literate in Tibetan, however, the phonetic transcription system that Yü employs is neither standard nor consistent, e.g., "*kle*" (33) and "*klu*" (60). In addition, most Tibetan words are given in Tibetan script throughout the book and some have errors, most likely due to font compatibility issues, e.g., "Guru Tsokye Dorje" (54), "*kyamashetoka*" (57), and "*sems rgyud*" (174). This emphasizes the value of including Wylie transliterations to preserve the original Tibetan spellings.

These criticisms, however, do not detract from the book's contributions in providing thoughtful new insights into the concept of landscape and Tibetan landscapes in particular. The book is well worth reading for those interested in Tibetan Studies, cultural anthropology, and cultural geography.

NON-ENGLISH TERMS

Aku Norbu, a khu nor bu ཨ་སུ་ནོར་བུ།

Ami Megbon, a myes dmag dpon ཨ་མྱེས་དམག་དཔོན།

Amne Machen, a myes rma chen ཨ་མྱེས་རྩ་ཆེན།

bde chen བདེ་ཆེན།

Beijing 北京

brag dmar nang བྲག་དམར་ནང་།

chuantong 传统

Diqing 迪庆

Dorje Tashi, rdo rje bkra shis དོར་ཇེ་བཀྲ་ཤིས།

Drul Yelpe, brag yer ba བྲུ་ཡེ་པ།

Duojie Zhaxi 多杰扎西

Golok, mgo log གོ་ལོག་ལོག་།

Guide 贵德

Guo luo 果洛

Guru Tsokye Dorje, gu ru mtsho skyes rdo rje གུ་རུ་མཚོ་སྐྱེས་དོ་རེ།

Hainan 海南

khri ka ཁྲི་ཀ།

kle, klu ཀླུ།

Kyamashetoka, rgya ma shi tho kha ཀྱམ་ཤེ་ཏོ་ཀ།

lha sa ལྷ་ས། ལྷ་ས།

luohou 落后

minzu 民族

mixin 迷信

mtsho lho མཚོ་ལྷོ།

mtsho sngon མཚོ་སྔོན།

Pema Tseden, pad+ma tshe brtan པདྨ་ཚེ་བཀྲ་ནས།

Qinghai 青海

rgyal thang རྒྱལ་ཐང་།

Sambha, sum ba སུམ་པ།

Sambhadrubgne, sum ba grub gnas སུམ་པ་གུབ་གནས།

sems rgyud སེམས་རྒྱུད།

Shangrila, Xiangelila, 香格里拉, sems kyi nyi zla སེམས་ཀྱི་ནི་ལྷ།

Shogdong, zhogs dung ཞོག་ས་དུང་།

Songba 松巴

Yunnan 云南

Zhemeang 者么昂

Zhongdian 中甸